

Promoting the use of primary care

ISSUE: How can Medicare promote the use of primary care services?

KEY POINTS:

Increasing the use of primary care services and reducing reliance on specialty care can improve the efficiency of health care delivery without compromising quality. Research shows that areas with more specialist-oriented patterns of care are not associated with improved access to care, higher quality, better outcomes, or greater patient satisfaction (Fisher et al. 2003a, 2003b). Physicians may view primary care services as less profitable and the specialties that provide them less desirable. As such, primary care services are at risk for being underprovided to the Medicare population. Another signal that primary care services may be relatively undervalued is the steady decline in the share of U.S. medical school graduates entering family practice and primary care residency training programs. Further, FFS Medicare provides no encouragement for beneficiaries to seek care from primary care practitioners before or instead of specialists, when appropriate.

Primary care services and, perhaps more importantly, primary care physicians may be critical to delivering more efficient, higher quality care to the aging Medicare population. This paper discusses three initiatives that may be used to promote the use and delivery of primary care services:

- Medical home programs
- Maintenance of certification efforts, and
- Fee schedule adjustments.

ACTION: The Commission should provide staff with input on these issues and further relevant work.

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